



Baird demonstrates his independence on environmentalism

Friday, November 04, 2005

Some may remember that when Democrat Brian Baird first ran for Congress back in the 1990s, he was caricatured by his opponents as a bearded college professor wacky environmentalist of some sort.

That was an exaggeration at the time and since then our 3rd District U.S. representative has demonstrated he is no pawn of the radical environmental movement. And he has even differed with the mainstream environmentalists. This independence is to his credit.

The most recent example is his teaming this week with Oregon Republican Rep. Greg Walden on a common sense bill to speed the salvage of timber killed by catastrophic fire, disease, insects and weather-related damage by expediting administrative appeals and legal challenges to such harvest. Walden is in a key position to move the measure along as chairman of the House Resources forests subcommittee and Baird's bipartisan co-sponsorship should also help.

The Baird-Walden bill achieves the primary goals of reducing waste of an economically valuable natural resource and at the same time allowing for faster recovery of the burned forest and the habitats that provides.

"People use wood. The wood has to come from somewhere, and if the choice is between cutting dead trees and cutting live trees, the best choice would be dead trees," Baird said. Good point. But some environmentalist extremists don't want any dead trees removed, even if supports much-needed jobs and provides economic benefit to struggling communities.

Dominick DellaSala, a forest ecologist for the World Wildlife Fund, apparently doesn't want any salvage logging at all. Leaving dead trees standing is essential for fish and wildlife habitat and providing building blocks for a new natural forest as the trees fall and further rot and decay, he said.

But removal of commercially valuable dead trees reduces dry fuels that make additional wildfires more likely that can further delay forest recovery, further risk private property and human lives, and further damage wildlife and fish habitat and delay its restoration.

Currently, environmental analysis required before salvage logging sales are approved can take more than a year. Further delays are caused by lengthy appeals of the sales, and even court challenges of them. Meanwhile, the commercial value of the timber declines as decay worsens.

"Instead of having a process that takes two to three years, you can shorten that to 120 days," Walden said of the legislation. He has a first-hand example in southwest Oregon where because of environmental delays it took nearly three years before salvage of timber killed by the 2002 Biscuit Fire could begin this spring. By then much of its commercial value was lost, a blatant waste of the resource.

And as Baird points out, such delays also slow restoration of the forests that not just the environmentalists but the forest industry itself desires. Because of undue environmental delay of timber salvage, only 1 percent of the 500,000 acres in the Biscuit Fire are now being restored, Baird said. Where the downed and dead timber hasn't been removed, restoration, such as replanting, is difficult.

Environmentalists, such as Emily Platt, executive director of the Gifford Pinchot Task Force, lose credibility by creating the perception salvage logging will remove all dead timber and thereby habitat and nutrients it provides. Rather, many dead and downed trees and debris that wouldn't have any salvage value would remain in the forest.

As to salvage from wildfires in the controversial roadless areas in national forests, Baird notes that access roads for the logging would be only temporary.

And environmentalists' concerns about the salvage operations opening the door to logging of

green timber is bogus. In fact, the more dead timber made available for harvest, the less the need for green timber.

The East Lewis County-based Pinchot Partnership criticizes Baird for not including some of its issues in the bill. But while they haven't been a problem in Southwest Washington for decades, large wildfires and the need for salvage could occur here and Baird is right not to make the bill a catch-all.